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OPINION

HOMES RULE

Never A Better Time For A Regional Housing Action Agenda

Towns Working Together To Create Much-Needed Housing

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There is a built-in conflict at the core of our communal identity in Massachusetts. Guided by the principle of “home rule,” each of our 351 municipalities



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is fiercely protective of the responsibility of its own fortunes. Yet we live in a commonwealth – one of four in the nation – that stresses our interdependencies and a shared responsibility for a common good.

So when problems loom too large for local communities, there is a framework for the common spirit to gain traction. That time seems to be now, as there are glimmers that regionalism may finally be catching a break. The looming problems we face – like homelessness and shortages of housing, especially housing that is affordable for the middle class – are forcing us to try anew at regional solutions.

Marc Draisen, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), an organization that with 101 community members in the Boston area, understands the value of regional approaches, particularly as they relate to housing. He recalls the late and popular Boston Mayor Tom Menino saying, “I want to be a housing leader, not a housing loner.”

Unquestioningly, Boston excels in the area of affordable housing. It leads the re-

gion, with about 19 percent of its housing stock considered affordable, and it ranks as one of the leading metro areas in the country. But many of the surrounding communities don’t meet the state’s 10 percent target under its affordable housing guidelines.

Consider that if all the cities and towns in the Greater Boston region featured 19 percent, like Boston, that would mean more than 56,000 more homes. Ironically, 56,000 is a significant number, for this reason – if the

Working Together

Sheila Dillon, who is chief of housing and director of Boston’s Department of Neighborhood Development, views a regionally cooperative approach as essential. She highlights the Metro Mayors Coalition, representing Boston and 12 other communities around Boston, which addresses common problems like economic development and public health emergencies. Dillon said the Walsh administration is committed to work-

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region did reach 19 percent, it would create more than the total number of housing units that Boston Mayor Marty Walsh’s recent report, “Housing a Changing City: Boston 2030,” found will be needed in Boston alone over the next decade and a half.

The report recognizes that its workforce comes from beyond the city’s municipal boundaries. “Boston is not an isolated city,” the report reminds. “In order to further our economic development, we must promote regionalism and link the Boston business community with our neighbors.”

ing on regional solutions to address our housing needs.

This coalition, which was established by MAPC in 2001, is planning a regional climate adaptation summit this coming spring, addressing what many believe is a paramount issue for a coastal region.

Yet the coalition should consider making housing – and the critical need for more housing available across the income spectrum – No. 2 on their agenda. Understanding the need for housing community by community, identifying tools and obstacles to cre-

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ate homes, building consensus, and supporting cities and towns to achieve these goals in a community-centric way would constitute movement toward a solution – a safe, attractive and affordable place for every Massachusetts resident to come home to.

The housing shortage in our area manifests itself in many ways, but one of the most visible is the number of homeless people living in Boston itself. With its concentration of resources to assist those who are homeless, Boston becomes a destination as it fulfills a humanitarian purpose to those in need. Yet, its statistics show that almost 40 percent of those who find shelter in Boston's homeless facilities are actually from other communi-

ties. City and town leaders naturally will be seeking leadership from the new state administration under Gov.-elect Charles Baker. His appointment of a respected municipal leader in Jay Ash, the city manager in Chelsea, to lead the state's housing and economic development secretariat holds promise for housing advocates that the state will play an active role.

There are a few encouraging seeds that have taken root around the state as regional housing efforts. In 2011, six towns – Bedford, Concord, Lexington, Lincoln, Sudbury and Weston – established a Regional Housing Services Office as an innovative approach to managing affordable housing from a municipal perspective. There is also a regional hous-

ing production effort on Cape Cod to do the same.

We are inspired by the leadership taking shape that recognizes that housing challenges are not confined in municipal boundaries. Let's nurture these efforts. We are, in fact, all in this together, and the time to build our future is now. ■

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